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ABSTRACT

The University of Southern California (USC) Library School offered an experimental self-paced, independent learning program during the 1976-1977 academic year to help those students who desire this type of professional training but are unable to attend classes on a daily or semi-weekly basis in the traditional pattern of scheduling. Program objectives included allowing students to pursue a degree or continuing education program under circumstances convenient to them, researching and evaluating the independent study curriculum as compared with the regular traditional program, and producing not "finished" graduates but life-long learners. Six courses were offered in several time frames: late afternoon, evening, and Saturday. For each course, faculty members developed supplementary enrichment materials, course outlines, modules, and study guides. Student evaluation consisted of refined pretests developed for each of the three types of classes, periodic tests and examinations, and post-tests. Findings indicate that the program was successful because all of the students increased their scores between the pre- and post-tests, self-paced students' performance was generally equal to that of students in the regular program, and they tended to have fewer incompletes. Recommendations and suggestions for future programs are included. (JPF)

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GOING BEYOND THE RIGIDITIES OF FORMAL, TRADITIONAL EDUCATION: INDEPENDENT, SELF-PACED UNIVERSITY STUDY

by

Martha Boaz

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Going Beyond the Rigidities of Formal Traditional Education;
Independent, Self-Paced University Study

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What is currently being done to accommodate adults in higher education? Today, many people--because of age, money, time, job requirements, family, or personal responsibilities--are prevented from learning by the rigidities of formal education. Society is asking and expecting more from the individual and from the organization. This demonstrates the importance of life long learning and of the need to provide educational opportunities for all. One professional school, The Graduate School of Library Science at the University of Southern California, has come forward with a program in self-paced, independent learning to help those who are motivated towards this type of education and who are unable to attend school on a daily or semi-weekly basis, in the traditional schedule-pattern of education.

The USC Library School was able to offer this program through a grant from the Research Division, Bureau of Library Services of the U.S. Office of Education. The title of the project was "Library School Educational Program Without Walls." This independent self-paced educational program, was offered during the 1976-77 academic year.

The general objectives and needs for the program were:

(1) To provide opportunities for independent, self-paced study to those persons who cannot, for financial, family, or personal reasons, pursue traditional regularly scheduled classes; (2) to allow individuals to pursue a degree or continuing education program in a manner and under circumstances convenient to them; (3) to assist persons to get an education who must integrate their education with their ongoing lives; (4) to offer opportunities for a mixed work-study program in order to help focus life patterns away from specifically compartmentalized time, age and educational levels to more integrated normal mixtures of education and work at all ages and throughout a life time; (5) to help professional, career-oriented individuals become more effective and more perceptive members of society; (6) to develop a program which will assist individuals in their self-enrichment goals to become more knowledgeable, imaginative, creative, critical, and useful people; (7) to provide educational opportunities to persons who wish to take responsibility for their own learning; (8) to instill a desire for continued education and to provide skills that will enable the student to pursue independent, self enrichment study beyond this particular program; (9) to provide opportunities for research about independent study and evaluation of the independent, self-paced study curriculum as compared with the regular traditional program; (10) to serve as a prototype professional school in

this experimental pilot program designed to assist in supplying the future information needs of society. (11) to place strong emphasis on student self-direction in learning, and, at the same time, maintain close teaching-learning relationships between students, teachers, and other people; (12) to produce not "finished" graduates but life-long learners.

In order to fulfill the above objectives the faculty focused on new approaches to teaching and teaching methods. The following work was done: Each teacher prepared outlines, modules and study guides for each of the independent, self-paced courses. Each teacher developed supplementary enrichment materials for the courses. Refined tests were prepared to measure the self-paced as well as the traditional learning which took place in the classes. The group of faculty members teaching in this project met with the director of the program, in committee sessions, to review and plan the work.

Scope and Schedule: Six courses were offered in several time frames: late afternoon, evening and Saturday. The later afternoon and evening classes met, one a week, six to eight times during a semester and the Saturday classes met in "intensive" block sessions on six Saturdays spread out over the semester. The latter met from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. on the six scheduled Saturdays.

Evaluation: (1) Periodic tests and exminations were given in each course and students' learning and performance were compared with that of students in the regular program. (2) An improved and refined student information sheet was administered the first day of classes. (3) Refined pre-tests of relevant preparation were developed for each of the three types of classes. These tests were screened for items which were judged to reflect significant advantage to the self-paced or to the control-normal classroom approach. (4) Post-tests were also administered; there was particular interest in the results of one course which had two sections--one in the regular program and one in the self-paced. The post-test scores showed that the self-paced group had a significantly greater gain in learning the material, but when the differences in test scores were compared by an independent t-test the results showed only slight significance at the .05 level. This test tended to indicate little difference in effectiveness of the two methods.

Effective and ineffective activities: Effective activities included the development of course materials that were especially adapted to self-paced learning and, in some cases, certain media were very helpful. The requirement for currency kept the faculty alert, with regularly updated materials. (At least one textbook will probably be developed as a result of this program.) According to one teacher, this type of study prevented the students from submitting "canned" bibliographies, calling them their own work. Another benefit was presentation of sound course content in a time frame that accommodated individual differences and allowed students to hold full time positions and to come from distances

more than 100 miles from the campus.

Ineffective work was, to some extent, related to the production of audio-visual materials to supplement instruction. The personnel, time and skill required for production was not always available. There were some problems connected with the testing procedure. The testing instrument was not pre-validated and in several cases there was no control group. However, as one faculty member noted, "Every single student made a gain in score between the pre and post tests. That means they all learned something in the course, and it is statistically significant when you have 100% of the class improving."

Significant associated data to be considered in planning such projects: It is important that provision be made for: (1) time for counseling and advising students who are contemplating taking these special courses; motivation plays an important part in the success or failure of the student; advisement should occur as far in advance of registration as possible; (2) preparation, by the faculty, of course materials before the courses begin--self-paced courses require much more in the matter of materials for student guidance; (3) provision for access to materials should be made so that students will be readily able to locate needed library and audio visual materials, either on the university campus or in locations adjacent to students' work or living environment; (4) provision for tutorial assistance from faculty members--this can be done by telephone, letter or personal visits; (5) skilled professional and technical staff should be available for media production and for evaluation procedures; (6) adequate budgets should be provided for the

development of the above needs as well as to compensate faculty members who are willing and interested in teaching the courses.

Recommendations: For future or similar programs it is recommended: (1) that an alternative be found in the university registration system which requires completion of the course within the semester; (An alternate plan allowing more time would be more in keeping with the independent, self-paced concept of learning. It should be noted that this format will require even more time of the instructor and the library school administrator, but it probably will be more effective in serving the individual); (2) that regular up-dating of course materials be required of faculty, for this is essential to teaching and learning effectiveness in the classes; (3) that faculty members be requested to prepare all materials for the courses, well in advance of the time when the courses are to be offered; (4) that students be instructed in early session(s) about "how to do" independent study and that only mature, well-motivated students be allowed to take the courses; that a test be devised to check students' ability to perform in independent, self-paced courses; (5) that plans be made for students to have regular contact with instructors (when needed or desired); (6) that pre-tests, post-tests and other testing instruments be pre-validated and balanced in content; (7) that, when possible, the self-paced group of students be compared with the control group of students in order to make a direct statistical comparison between the two; (8) that other variations of the format used

in this experiment be tried; for example: two-week intensive courses, in which a class might be held three or four hours per day, six days per week for a two week period; (Suitable two week periods might include Christmass vacation and two weeks in June between the end of spring and beginning of summer session. (It was hoped that this could have been done, in this program, this year, but personnel was not available for it.) (9) that courses in simulation and gaming be offered in the self-paced curriculum: thse might be highly amendable to the flexible formats of self-paced and "Intensive" that have already been used in this program; (10) that research be done in several areas: (a) adult learning and the effectiveness, in general, of self-paced independent study; (b) an analysis of learner responses to the use of media (particularly television) in this type of curriculum; and, (c) a comparison of self-paced, independent courses with those in the traditional format; (11) that the self-paced course offerings be limited to certain classes which best lend themselves to this format; that a certain number of courses always be required in a regular full schedule for a degree. (Note: The self-paced course will never be better than the well prepared and well taught classroom course with a live instructor. It does, however, have a place in library education. That place is to serve students whose work schedules, family responsibilities, or geographic locations do not permit regular attendance at school).

Another recommendation which has no bearing on this particular program but might have significant results is that some institution or agency sponsor a conference for an exchange of ideas on non-traditional modes of study. Several institutions have already been experimenting and would have valuable information to share. Among these have been Johnston College of the University of Redland; The University of Mid-America at Lincoln, Nebraska; and Goddard College at Plainfield, Vermont. A number of public libraries have also been involved in independent study programs. In 1971, the Dallas Public Library entered into a grant proposal in cooperation with Southern Methodist University to provide learning aid to College Level Examination Program (CLEP) test-takers in five branch libraries of the Dallas Public Library System. Other public libraries involved in independent study programs have been: Atlanta, Baltimore, Cleveland, Denver, Miami-Dade, Portland, Salt Lake City; St. Louis, and Woolbridge. The number and variety of these programs illustrate the need for new types of learning opportunities and they seem to fortell future trends in non-traditional education.

Conclusions

This self-paced program was, on the whole, a successful one. The quality of the students and the level of their performance were, generally speaking, equal to the students in the regular program. The self-paced students tended to have fewer incomplete than students in the regular courses. The program provided a curriculum and schedule variation that accommodated motivated students who, because of personal or job problems, could not conveniently attend school in the traditional schedule of two to three class meetings each week. The program compared well with its traditional counterpart.